

STEPHEN, THE GIANT AMONG THE DWARFS

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An elderly Christian was asked what he desired most in life, and after a few moments reflection he replied, "I desire three things: (1) To be found in Christ; (2) To be like Christ; and (3) To be with Christ." I have asked many people the same question. A little boy told me he wished to become a fireman. Students like books, misers covet money, politicians and athletes desire fame, alcoholics yearn for liquor and drugs. The testimony of the old Christian suggests sunshine on lofty mountain peaks overlooking valleys filled with fog. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was a giant among dwarfs, a convert who matured quickly. Five thought-provoking details invite attention.

He Was Greatly Esteemed (Acts 6:5)

It may be safely assumed that Stephen was one of the first converts won by the early Christians. Probably he was attending the Feast of Pentecost when the apostles commenced preaching the gospel. He was never known as an associate of the original apostles and was not mentioned in any of the Gospels. It is therefore assumed he first believed in Christ when Peter delivered his testimony on the Day of Pentecost. Stephen was a Jew who had studied the Holy Writings, and when the claims of the Lord were presented, he realized that all for which he yearned could be found in Jesus of Nazareth. There were 3,000 converts in the initial meetings and 5,000 came later. Stephen became one of an army of 8,000 people, and it might have been easy for him to have been lost in the crowd. It was significant that within a short time he was well-known to an immense number of people. When the twelve apostles considered it necessary to appoint trustworthy persons to superintend the distribution of financial help to the impoverished widows within the church, the first person nominated was Stephen. Already he had gained the attention of the Christian leaders. How that happened so quickly may never be known, yet it is evident the young convert was recognized to be a man of outstanding ability who possessed qualities of leadership. He was a man in Christ. Stephen's earlier life remained undisclosed, but when he embraced the teachings of Christianity, he soon became a champion. Every day he became more like his Lord.

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He Was Graciously Endowed (Acts 6:8)

"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people." It appears incomprehensible that one so young in the faith should mature so quickly. Evidently success in Christian service is not entirely dependent upon academic distinction—valuable as that may be. Educational attainments can never be an effective substitute for the anointing of the Holy Spirit. As far as is known, Stephen was not a graduate of any theological institution and had not received a course in apologetics. His overwhelming success as a preacher of the gospel was the result of his being filled with the divine energy, which transformed an immature believer into a dynamic orator.

When confronted by disease, Stephen stretched forth his hand and healed the sick. He laughed at impossibilities. His exploits in the name of Christ electrified his audience. His fame spread far and wide, and at least to some degree, he became one of the most popular members of the early church. It might have been this phenomenon which brought him to the attention of the apostles who elected him to a place of importance within the organization of the expanding church. The man who was already in Christ was swiftly becoming like Christ.

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He Was Genuinely Elected (Acts 6:3-5)

It is easily understood why the increasing needs of the church added to the pressure of administration. Converts were losing employment; widows were hungry. Many people who possessed property willingly sold their assets to contribute to the finances of the church. It quickly became evident that trustworthy officials were required to allocate funds to impoverished members. It was extremely complimentary when the entire church membership decided to recommend Stephen to superintend the allocation of church funds. Apparently he was the first choice made by the assembly. The people loved and admired him and considered him to be worthy of their trust. The Bible describes how the apostles refused to be burdened with mundane affairs, believing they should give all their attention to the study of God's Word and prayer. Their decision was accepted by their followers, but the man chosen to lead the selected committee was probably a more effective preacher than most of the men who refused to do his job. It was true that Simon Peter was the chief spokesman for the leaders of the church, that he was also the

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dynamic preacher used by God on the Day of Pentecost. Nevertheless, even his efforts did not surpass the thrilling address delivered by Stephen when he stood before his accusers. It was significant that when the Chief Administrator of the Kitchen preached before the Jewish Sanhedrin, God arranged that his astonishing sermon should be completely recorded for posterity. Fifty-two verses in the seventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles are devoted entirely to the material used by Stephen in his outstanding oration. He began with Abraham and finished with Christ. It covered a period of 5,000 years and terminated with the most challenging appeal ever made by an evangelist. Evidently it was a spontaneous outpouring, and it would be interesting to know which listener ultimately wrote what was said. That such a preacher should be removed from the pulpit to become the administrator of widows' pensions seemed to be a travesty. Would he not have been more useful preaching to crowds in Jerusalem? Stephen never complained; he knew how to serve his Lord anywhere.

He Was A Gifted Expositor (Acts 7:2-53)

The sermon revealed the type of life Stephen had enjoyed. No student could have memorized so much within a matter of days. That delightful man had always been a lover of the prophets and a student of their writings. Even had he been a regular worshiper at the synagogue, he could have expressed in minutes the entire course of Jewish history. Evidently this outstanding Christian had been "A Man of the Book." He was faithful in his studies, fearless in his statements, and fervent in his spirit.

It was significant that when he addressed the leaders of his nation his countenance resembled the face of an angel. It reflected the glow of the hidden fires which burned within his soul. Stephen knelt before the Lord before he appeared before people! His study had become an upper room. He feared God and no one else and provided an example for evangelists in every generation. All preachers should be students of the book! Unfortunately many ministers deviate from that path. They become involved with all types of social issues and work unceasingly with all kinds of organizations. Apparently, some of them have forgotten Paul's advice to Timothy, "Preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2). When the cutting edge of a sword is ruined, it remains a piece of steel unfit to perform its vocation in battle. When a preacher ceases to be a prophet of God, he becomes

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an ecclesiastical ornament within a religious building and cannot be that for which he was ordained. Even before Stephen recognized the wonder of his Savior, he was being prepared to become one of God's choicest servants.

He Was a Glorious Example (Acts 7:9-60)

The die was now cast; events were approaching their saddening climax. Accused, condemned, but undaunted, the young crusader had been taken to his place of execution. Angry men were lifting stones soon to become missiles. Perhaps there was increasing excitement in heaven, for the King of angels had risen from His place at the Father's right hand. A very special servant was about to come home, and angels had gathered to hail his arrival. "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59-60).

The first Christian martyr was certainly in Christ. Indisputably, he was like Christ, for he asked forgiveness for his enemies (see Luke 23:34). It was a foregone conclusion that such a saint would ultimately be with Christ. When he awakened from his sleep, he was entranced to see the change in his surroundings. He was standing within the city of God and before him was the Savior with outstretched arms. This story reminds one of an old saint who, when he was about to leave this world, exclaimed, "If this is dying, it's wonderful."

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